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ABSTRACT

In this digest the problem of underachievement among gifted students is examined. Gifted underachievers manifest three behavior patterns in the school setting: non-communication and withdrawal, passive compliance, and aggressive/disruptive behavior. Gifted underachievers have been identified in greater numbers recently. Some of the causes of underachievement include lack of motivation, values conflicts, lack of environmental nurturance of intellectual potential, developmental delays or chronic poor health, specific disabilities, and specific or general academic skill deficits. Educational programing should address three critical areas: (1) an understanding of the nature and problems of being gifted; (2) development of constructive ways to cope with conflict and frustration caused by the gap between cognitive ability and performance level; and (3) development of a healthier, more realistic self concept and higher self esteem. To be effective, programing should feature challenging and meaningful curriculum, maximum opportunity for inquiry and creativity, a compatible peer group, and support services. (CL)

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DIGEST

UNDERACHIEVING GIFTED STUDENTS

Underachievement can be simply defined as academic performance that is significantly lower than predicted based on some reliable evidence of learning potential. It is reasonable to assume there exists a range of mild to severe underachievement. When the discrepancy appears to be significant to the teacher and/or parents, attention should be given to the student's specific needs for modification of educational programming.

What Does It Mean for an Intellectually Gifted Student to Be an Underachiever?

The concept of an underachieving gifted student may seem inherently contradictory if intellectually gifted students are seen only as those who excel in school at high levels of academic achievement. However, since the new federal definition was formulated in the early 1970s, there has been growing support in the field for defining intellectual giftedness as exceptional *potential* for high academic achievement, whether or not it has been demonstrated at school. It is assumed that the gifted underachiever has exceptional potential. A student may be gifted in one or many areas of learning or cognitive processing; however, few mentally gifted students have the capability of truly excelling in all subjects and on all kinds of academic tasks.

Gifted underachievers manifest three patterns of behavioral responses to the school setting: (a) non-communicative and withdrawn, (b) passively complying to "get by," and (c) aggressive/disruptive "problem" students. Behavior patterns of all three groups tend to reflect feelings of low self-esteem, a lack of belief in their ability to influence outcomes in school, an unrealistic self-concept, and negative attitudes toward school. Generally, these students tend to be loners who have difficulty making or maintaining friendships.

How Are Gifted Underachievers Identified?

Increasing numbers of intellectually gifted students who have not been recognized and served as gifted because of relatively low patterns of achievement have been discovered over the last two decades as a result of three significant changes in educational practices. First, there has been an increase in the use of tests and sophisticated assessment procedures. Second, there has been an increase in teacher referrals for special education services because of learning or behavioral problems. Third, there has been an increased effort to recognize and develop the potential abilities of culturally different and minority children. Gifted underachievers are also identified as a result of parental accounts of out-of-school behaviors that show advanced interests and skills.

The most disconcerting group of gifted underachievers are those who are not recognized while in school. Awareness of this group has developed primarily through the identification of adults with superior intellectual abilities whose school records show mediocre or poor academic performance.

Why Do We Need to Identify Gifted Underachievers?

The first reason is obvious—the loss of potential contributions to society from that individual. The second reason is not so obvious—the underachiever's vulnerability to significant mental health and social problems. Often the gifted underachiever becomes a disturbing behavioral problem both at home and at school. This problem is a natural consequence of the conflict between the individual's personal psychological needs and the lack of opportunities for appropriate learning provided by the school. The third reason is that early identification permits a better chance for reversing patterns of underachievement.

What Are Some of the Causes of Underachievement?

- *Lack of motivation.* Many highly gifted and creative children have learning styles that are incompatible with prevailing instructional methods. Furthermore, the level of instruction may be inappropriate for these students and the restrictions on learning in the classroom discourage their full participation.
- *Values conflict.* Students may not want to participate in school because of conflicts between the values of the school or the gifted program and the values held by the individuals and/or the cultures from which they come; for example, female students from cultures in which a college education or a career is not expected may underachieve.
- *Lack of environmental nurturance of intellectual potential.* Low socioeconomic status families often fail to provide exposure that stimulates the development of higher level thinking skills. Enriching experiences such as travel, educational activities, and shared problem solving may be neglected. Such students may be from isolated rural settings, economically disadvantaged urban sites, or specific ethnic or cultural minorities that do not encourage intellectual development.
- *Developmental delays or chronic poor health.* These students are characterized by relatively low energy levels or interfering hyperactivity. They may have a mild delay in perceptual motor skill development, or a general immaturity in all areas. Often these students have entered school as the youngest in their class.
- *Specific disabilities.* Impairment due to specific learn-

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ing disabilities, brain damage, cerebral dysfunction or neurological impairment, or lack of normal hearing or visual perception may be the cause of underachievement. Some of these students are in fact dyslexic or neurologically disabled. It is not the disability that produces the underachievement, but the lack of appropriate programming. These students frequently are not adequately challenged or encouraged to develop their intellectual abilities because of low expectations and a narrow curriculum.

- *Specific or general academic skill deficits.* These students may have difficulty with writing, reading, math, or higher level skills necessary for subject matter mastery and high achievement.

After Identifying Students as Gifted Underachievers, What Needs to Be Done? What Educational Programming Is Necessary?

Successful approaches to reversing patterns of underachievement have been based on a view that the problem behavior has been shaped by forces within the school experience that can be altered. These forces essentially are: (a) the social messages conveyed by the teacher and peers that invite or discourage the student to participate (Purkey, 1984) and (b) the degree to which the curriculum and instruction is appropriate for the learning style and performance level of the student. Successful interventions create positive forces to shape achievement behavior.

Programming for gifted underachievers must address three critical areas: (a) an understanding of self—the nature of and problems related to being gifted; (b) development of constructive ways of coping with the inevitable conflict and frustration created by the significant gap between cognitive ability and performance level; and (c) development of a healthier, more realistic self-concept and higher self-esteem.

Effective programming for reversing patterns of underachievement can occur in self-contained classrooms, in resource rooms that provide supplementary services, or through the development of an individual educational plan that may involve a mentor in the school or community. Regardless of the structure, there are five programming components that need to be addressed:

1. The teacher(s) must accept the fact that the student is intellectually gifted, does not want to underachieve or fail, has low self-esteem, and needs to develop constructive coping skills and self-understanding. The teacher(s) must be skilled in guidance techniques, accurate in understanding the nature of giftedness, and positive in emotional response to the challenge of working with this type of student.
2. The curriculum must be challenging, personally meaningful, and rewarding to the gifted underachiever. There must be a balance between basic skill development and more advanced exploration through the arts and sciences. Career exploration and the development of personal interests are also critical motivating elements, and all learning experiences should be designed for maximum challenge and success.
3. The instruction must require minimal memorization and drill/practice activity and provide maximal opportunity for inquiry, scientific investigation, and creative production. Self-directed learning activities should be encouraged and the students' self-discipline nurtured. The climate created by the instructional style of the teacher should be one of excitement, anticipation, personal satisfaction, and low pressure.
4. The peer group must include at least a few other gifted students, possibly other underachievers, who may become special friends. The group must be accepting of diversity and individual differences.
5. Special services should be provided as needed for handicapped students, for those in need of remedial instruction, or for group counseling. Supplementary psychological and medical services, including family counseling, may also be needed.

RESOURCES

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The content of this fact sheet is based upon the experimental work of Joanne Rand Whitmore that was reported in *Giftedness, Conflict, and Underachievement* (Allyn & Bacon, 1980), and her integration of subsequent experimental efforts and the modest amount of professional literature available on the subject.

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